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# Meet The Limelitters, Austin's secret legacy folk group

**Wes Eichenwald** Special to American-Statesman

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Daniel Boling, from left, Steve Brooks and Andy Corwin perform as The Limelitters. *Provided By The Limelitters*

Back in the summer of 1959 – two years before the Beach Boys and three years before the Rolling Stones ever mounted a stage – a group called The Limelitters played its first concert at the Hungry I club in San Francisco. The newly formed trio was aiming to catch the rising wave of the American folk music revival, which had been kicked off by the Weavers in the late '40s and more recently given a big boost by the Kingston Trio. With contemporaries like Peter, Paul and Mary, the New Christy Minstrels and the Brothers Four, they were far from alone in the genre, but with their tight harmonies, expertly paced shows and seriously witty stage patter, they soon became a big deal in the folk world, recording and touring almost constantly.

Fast forward 63 years. In place of the long-gone early '60s Limelitters – three clean-cut guys nattily dressed in suits and ties or occasionally tuxedos – stand three bearded, more casually dressed folkies of a certain age, with a different but still impressive way with three-part harmonies and thoughtful lyrics. And unlike the original trio, they all write and perform their own songs.

They're also a mostly local group – two of the three members live in Austin, bassist Andy Corwin and guitarist Steve Brooks, while guitarist/banjo player Daniel Boling makes his home in Albuquerque – and the glue that binds them is the Kerrville Folk Festival, where all three singer-songwriters have played both separately and as a group for years. On Oct. 27, they will play the O4 Center, their first Austin concert since January 2019.



Daniel Boling, from left, joined The Limelitters in 2019, Andy Corwin in 2004 and Steve Brooks in 2018. *Provided By The Limelitters*

Corwin has been a Limeliter since 2004; Brooks joined in 2018 and Boling the following year. The band isn't a full-time endeavor; all maintain solo careers and various other jobs and diversions in and out of the music business. (Brooks, for example, keeps busy as a freelance journalist, solo recording artist, songwriter for hire, and lay sermonizer at Unitarian churches.)

These days, being well out of the zeitgeist is a given and the trio fully embraces it, to the point of calling their new record "The Cutting Edge of Passé." It's a mixture of new songs (each band member contributes two), folk standards and reworked Limelitters classics, including "Take My True Love By The Hand," which was used in an episode of "Breaking Bad" in 2013.

Their O.G. folk style is so out at this point that it might as well be in again. Go ahead and say "OK, boomer" to them, and they'll happily acknowledge the generational dig – Corwin even wrote a song called "You Might Be a Baby Boomer If."

"In several songs that go out maybe to the older crowd, we're the butt of the joke," Corwin says. "We're old, so blah blah blah ... It's never the audience. Even when I perform my solo act and all the silly comedy songs that I write, usually they're very self-identifying, which I'm totally comfortable with."

(Full disclosure: Corwin is a friend I've known since he was a couple of years ahead of me at Herricks High School on Long Island. In those days he was a shaggy, wisecracking BMOOC and a star of the drama club, notably as a hilarious Pseudolus in the school's production of "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum." Corwin moved out to LA in '78, where he raised a family and made a living as a director, writer and editor of documentaries for film and TV cable channels; he moved to Austin in 2006.)



Alex Hassilev, from left, Lou Gottlieb and Glenn Yarbrough perform as the original Limelitters in the 1960s. *Provided By The Limelitters*

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But let's go back to the beginning. The original Limelitters were Lou Gottlieb, a double bassist with a doctorate in musicology and a gift for musical arrangements and comic dialogue; Alex Hassilev, a tall, movie-star-handsome guitarist, banjo player and sometime actor fluent in five languages; and Glenn Yarbrough, a stocky, moon-faced guy with a memorable tenor voice who went on to a distinguished solo career (though he preferred sailing to showbiz).

Simultaneously uptown and wacky, they were educated, sophisticated types who won over audiences with polish, variety and humor, though they never had a chart-topping hit (likely coming closest performing on the early '60s Coca-Cola TV ad "Things Go Better With Coke"). One concert review in the May 10, 1963, issue of the Edmonton (Canada) Journal called them "probably the most intellectual bunch of folk singers making the rounds today" and "the hottest guys in the business."

Yarbrough left the group in 1963, and the group disbanded two years later. In the normal course of events, The Limelitters' story should have ended there. But in 1976 they started doing annual reunion concerts and in 1981 Hassilev and Gottlieb started regularly touring as The Limelitters, with tenor Red Grammer replacing

Gottlieb died in 1996 and Yarbrough in 2016; Hassilev, now 90 and long retired, is the only surviving member of the original trio. After Gottlieb's death, Hassilev recruited Corwin, then performing in a political folk parody act called The Foremen, which had been signed by Warner Bros.

"I thought I was going to be a rock star, which didn't happen," Corwin says. The Foremen broke up a few years later and when Hassilev asked him again in 2004, he said yes.

Just as The Limelitters have gone through a bunch of personnel changes over the decades (their best-known former sideman is Roger McGuinn, who played guitar and banjo on one of their early LPs prior to his Byrds days), so have still-performing groups of similar vintages like Kingston Trio and Brothers Four, both of which The Limelitters regularly play bills with (they share a booking agency). Corwin, quoting singer Tom Paxton, jokes that they do it “because there’s hundreds of dollars to be made in folk music,” then adds, “I believe that the real reason so many of the ‘60s folk acts are still going is because everybody loves it – and by ‘it’ I don’t mean just the music itself, I mean the whole vibe – too much to give it up.”

Over the phone from his home in Los Angeles, Hassilev, who maintains informal ties with the group, praises the current combo while acknowledging the differences from the old days.

“As they have developed over the last couple of years I really (see) they have very much continuity of attitude,” he says. “It’s hard to define, but I think there’s a lot of the old Limelitters in what they do today.”



The current Limelitters still use founding member Lou Gottlieb's arrangements. *Provided By The Limelitters*

The group still uses Gottlieb’s original vocal arrangements, which Hassilev supplied. “The parts they’re singing are, for the most part, the parts that Lou wrote,” he says. “And like any good soup, when you stir it long, enough it starts to blend together. In many ways they have become their own group, but the (original) Limelitters are still their touchstone.”

Humor has always been an important part of Limelitters shows, Corwin picking up where Gottlieb left off. “Lou Gottlieb (was) a quintessential humorist whose hero was Lenny Bruce,” says Hassilev. “I used to say that Lou Gottlieb was the humor and Glenn was the voice, and I was the sex symbol by default.” For his part, Brooks simply says “A sense of humor is important when you’re in a band with two other people!”

Who is their audience? “Our joke response to that question is ‘seniors and their parents,’” says Corwin. “But they bring their grandkids. The magical thing about The Limelitters, honestly, in 18 years we’ve never given a bad concert. We’ve never not had people enthusiastically running up to talk to us after shows, because they loved us. It’s high school kids, college kids. Of course, we get people who nowadays are in their upper 70s, early 80s perhaps. They show up with LPs that they’ve had for 50 years and ask us to sign them; they say, ‘I saw you guys at Ohio Wesleyan University in 1961.’ Well, you didn’t see me!”

These Limelitters may not be the original trio, but still, they’re the real thing and there is something valiant and graceful to their enterprise. Although the group doesn’t find itself in the limelight often these days (sorry), they’re carrying on a very American tradition. Bridging the decades is still their specialty.

## **If you go: The Limelitters in concert**

**When:** 7 p.m. doors, 8 p.m. show on Oct. 27

**Where:** The O4 Center, 2701 S. Lamar Blvd.

**Tickets:** \$25-\$100

**More information:** [o4center.com/calendar/thelimelitters](http://o4center.com/calendar/thelimelitters)